

COLLEGES HELP PROPEL GROWTH OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

Crain's Detroit Business

August 04, 1997

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Section: Business; Pg. 11

Length: 1067 words

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Body

Michigan universities have been forming charter schools at a rapid pace. In the past two years, Central Michigan University alone has issued charters for 40 schools.

The Mt. Pleasant university plans to open six more by fall. Other state schools also are increasing their involvement with charter schools.

Oakland University in Auburn Hills expects to issue charters for three more Detroit-area schools by fall, said Angelete Melhado, who heads the university's two established charter schools. And Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, which also operates two schools now, will issue two additional charters for the fall.

"Charter schools aren't competitive against traditional public schools," Melhado said. "We try to charter schools that provide services not provided by traditional public schools."

Charter schools eventually could become training grounds for students in EMU's education program, said Joseph Pollack, the university's charter school director.

"We look at them as models of innovation," Pollack said. "It's something that universities, particularly those that have education programs, should be involved with."

As of June, 78 charter schools were operating in Michigan, said Ormand Hook, director of the Michigan Resource Center for Charter Schools at CMU. That number could rise to 112 by the fall, Hook said.

Such schools typically get their start when a university issues a charter. The schools usually are run by a university-appointed board, and the university makes sure the school meets state and federal guidelines and funding requirements. Charters also are issued for a specific time period, and if a school fails to meet state guidelines, the university can revoke its charter. 🖋️

While most schools in Michigan have been chartered by state universities, boards of K-12 schools, intermediate schools and community colleges also can authorize charter schools. Detroit Public Schools operates two.

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Charter schools must run on leaner budgets than most public schools. Last year, charter schools received maximum state funding of \$5,808 a student. That compares with state funding last year of \$7,195 a student in Detroit Public Schools. And, unlike public school districts, charter schools can't pick up additional revenue from millage or bond proposals.

By law, charter schools must undergo audits by certified public accountants every year. The 1997-98 operating budget at University Public School in Detroit, chartered by Wayne State University, is \$2.6 million. Of that, 80 percent is used to pay salaries and benefits. The rest is used to operate the school, said Principal Frederick Borowski.

To shave costs, the school often hires part-time staffers and contracts for such needs as special-education teachers.

Charter schools often contract with management companies such as Canton Township-based Schoolhouse Services and Staffing Inc., which provides management services and staffing, and helps the schools find suitable buildings.

Schoolhouse has contracts to manage vocational and technical schools for CMU, OU and Ferris State University, which is opening a charter school in Detroit, said Tyla Wells, the company's president.

"We (operate schools) like a business," Wells said. "If industry doesn't get a trained student from us, they won't support our schools. If we can only spend \$5,808, why must public school systems use more?"

Charter schools tend to have less bureaucracy and allow more curriculum control by parents and teachers. When University Public School teachers discovered students lagged in reading and math skills, requirements in those subjects were increased from two to four courses, Borowski said.

"This kind of thing would not happen in a regular school," he said. "If something doesn't work, our turnaround time is quicker than bigger school systems. Our profit comes when student achievement levels go up."

But charter schools haven't been without controversy. Though they were authorized by the Michigan Legislature in 1993, opposition from some unions, public school systems and school superintendents prevented charter schools from opening until the 1995-96 school year.

"Charter schools are a change, and not everyone is thrilled with change," said James Goenner, executive director of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, a private association that supports charter schools.

In Michigan, charter schools last year enrolled 12,870 students, less than 1 percent of the state's total school population, according to data from the Michigan Resource Center for Charter Schools.

And though the movement has the support of Gov. John Engler, the legislature capped the number of schools permitted to be chartered by universities this year at 100, said James Ryan, deputy director of Engler's Southeast Michigan office in downtown Detroit. Universities with

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charter schools also have been made responsible for filling out state education and financial reports.

"The focus has shifted," Goenner said. "Before, there was a fight to not let charter schools be allowed in the state. Now that parents are supporting the schools, the strategy is to strangle them with regulations."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: PUBLIC SCHOOLS (90%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (89%); MUNICIPAL FINANCE (89%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (89%); PRIMARY & SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS (78%); PRIMARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION (78%); COMMUNITY COLLEGES (78%); SCHOOL BONDS (78%); COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (78%); SCHOOL PRINCIPALS (78%); SPECIAL EDUCATION (73%); VOCATIONAL & TECHNICAL TRAINING (73%); TEACHING & TEACHERS (69%); BOARD CHANGES (68%); WAGES & SALARIES (63%); EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES (62%)

Company: STAFFING INC (60%); STAFFING INC (60%); CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY (84%); CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY (84%); EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY (83%); EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY (57%)

Organization: CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY (84%); CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY (84%); EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY (83%); EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY (57%)

Industry: PUBLIC SCHOOLS (90%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (89%); BUDGETS (87%); PRIMARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION (78%); COMMUNITY COLLEGES (78%); SCHOOL BONDS (78%); COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (78%); VOCATIONAL & TECHNICAL TRAINING (73%); BONDS (73%); EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES (62%); ACCOUNTING (60%)

Geographic: DETROIT, MI, USA (92%); MICHIGAN, USA (96%)

Load-Date: August 6, 1997